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Homing In · Robert Hill Long

The white leopard leaps from death's mouth,
cold, ice-clawed, indivisible from the snow
that cloaks its lope through New England:
it hunts the wino in his refrigerator-box bed,
the widow crying in a floodlit yard as she pours
kerosene on a heap of her husband's winter clothes.

Throughout the snow-whipped hills it stalks them,
the ones in cars idling in closed garages, the ones
who weigh a quart of scotch against a handful of Halcion.
And tonight the leopard homes in on something radiating
out of my skull that curses snow, curses my wife
for moving north and myself for not refusing to follow.

So many curses and if only one touches death, death
opens its mouth and the teeth-colored leopard leaps.
Anxiety, the therapist says, *depression*. The leopard,
I say, it's the leopard panting. When it closes in,
the white leopard reverses fever to chill, turns rage
into a desire to walk out into deep snow and lie down.

Sleep and maybe the leopard sleeps; laughter stops it
like a shot. But a brandy glass set down hard
on a kitchen windowsill brings it running:
its highbeam eyes pierce the whiteout, the walls
of the house: icy points, cold zeros on my ribs
and heart. From the window I can almost see

the huge white head. Since midnight I've been trying
to fill insomnia with the mating plumage of snowy egrets,
with that Carolina island anchored by yaupon trees
full of egret nests: the country I gave up,
its tiny heart-shaped rainbow clams buried
an inch beneath the tidal wash, that resurrect

and rebury themselves by the million every minute
of the day. Gave it up to go north and feel the nights
lose heat and lengthen, the cries of geese freeze
overhead, the porch crack at ten below under
the leopard's heavy pads. Upstairs my wife is crying:
it's cancer calling long-distance from Texas,

using the voice of her mother, or else another monster
image of birth gone wrong. The white leopard's listening,
it knows about her eight-month belly. In the snow
it paces exactly parallel to my pacing inside. It knows
I know where every knife lies in this house. It's ready
to take us all to its white room in the ice woods.

I test the back door lock, flick the floodlight on
to make the leopard shut its eyes and step back.
When the light goes off again I wait, not moving,
not wanting to inhale the breath that will move it
one step closer. The snowy tail switches the clapboard.
The white head rubs the window, testing it.